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SUBJECT: NATO FOREIGN MINISTERIAL IN OSLO -- FRENCH AGENDA

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, Reason 1
.4 B/D

11. (C) Summary: Following up on the U.S. agenda for the Oslo Ministerial, the MFA confirmed April 24 that France agrees that NATO should focus on Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Missile Defense. In the context of Missile Defense, France will propose that NATO highlight the 10th anniversary of the NATO-Russia founding act and the 5th anniversary of the NRC to ensure continued Russian appreciation of the NATO link. The French believe ISAF is making progress in Afghanistan, as witnessed by the absence of a Taliban spring offensive, but that more could be done to provide training to Afghans, even if no new French initiatives can be expected pending a better understanding of EU needs and the election of a new government. France is looking to NATO and the EU for a smooth transition in Kosovo. End Summary.

Afghanistan

12. (C) We met on April 24 with Nicolas Niemtchinow, MFA DAS-equivalent director for NATO, to discuss the April 26-27 NATO Foreign Ministerial at Oslo. Niemtchinow said that France shared the major U.S. objectives for Oslo: Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Missile Defense. He noted that the ISAF mission has been making progress, as evidenced by the absence of a Taliban spring offensive. Unfortunately, despite the mission's success, the rise in suicide bombings is creating a public impression that the situation is deteriorating. The French support greater public diplomacy efforts to counter these negative perceptions. Raising a familiar French argument, Niemtchinow added that more political discussions on NATO operations are needed at the NAC to show support for ISAF, and to highlight that ISAF is not "just about conducting military operations," but also about supporting the Afghans.

13. (C) In response to our query about the possibility of further French support for Afghanistan, Niemtchinow ventured that France fully concurs with the need to provide additional training to the Afghan Army and police. He said it was too soon to tell whether France would make any new commitments beyond the fifty additional trainers announced at Riga, as the French were waiting to see how the EU mission developed, including projected costs and materiel support needs. EU discussions on its mission were expected around mid-May, he added.

¶4. (C) Niemtchinow indicated that NATO and the NRC were appropriate venues to discuss missile defense. Without getting into a discussion, he referred to the French position, as outlined at NATO on April 19. (Note: France views missile defense as a legitimate bilateral issue between the U.S. and allies, which France does not oppose, although it prefers to rely on its own deterrence force. Additionally, for the immediate future, France would like the U.S. MD program to remain distinct from NATO's own missile defense discussions.)

¶5. (C) In line with discussions on missile defense, and given Russia's opposition, the MFA is hopeful that Allies can find a way to reconcile Russian concerns. Niemtchinow stated that one avenue to "nourish the Russian ego," might be to highlight at Oslo the relevance of NATO to Russia and vice-versa, by flagging the tenth anniversary of the Founding Act and the fifth anniversary of the NATO-Russia council. The aim would be to highlight the positive aspects of the NATO-Russia relationship. He suggested that the Allies might also consider how to include the Russians in NATO operations, possibly by having the Russians play a supporting role with ISAF (not boots on the ground).

Kosovo

¶6. (C) Niemtchinow said France is working hard to ensure that the NATO and the EU missions succeed and remains hopeful that a UN mandate can be ensured. France has a personal stake, as it currently leads COMKFOR and will lead the ESDP mission, he added. One element of concern is whether Turkey might insist on invoking Berlin Plus for the EU mission, Niemtchinow mused. Turkey has frequently blocked links between the EU and NATO, he added. (Note: France remains very frustrated with Turkey's approach to NATO missions. At present, Turkey still has not reinstated blanket overflight clearances for French overflights in support of ISAF operations, according to Niemtchinow. End note.)

Comment

¶7. (C) While professing French support for some of our goals at Oslo, Niemtchinow made it clear that no new French initiatives were likely. France is in the middle of its presidential elections, with the second and final round scheduled for May 6. Pending the formation of a new government, we do not foresee any immediate change in France's commitments to the NATO mission in Afghanistan. End Comment.

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